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ABSTRACT

In studies of young children in ghetto schools, those who most often ranked low in cooperative behavior were those with the most verbal and personal spontaneity. Unfortunately, these children with considerable self-confidence, eagerness, and curiosity become either disruptive and difficult or quiet, unresponsive, and nonlearning. The major educational problem for these children, whose environment has deprived them of models for connecting language with action, experience, and feelings, is that the school, teacher, and curriculum also do not provide them with opportunities for using their language and for intellectual growth. To encourage children's language involvement and expansion in school, teachers should listen to what children are trying to say, encourage their listening to others, extend children's thinking experiences through storytelling and book reading, foster group interaction, introduce learning tasks involving thinking, and reinforce their language use with compliments. (JM)

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BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN THE YOUNG CHILD'S LANGUAGE AND EFFECTIVE LEARNING

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> It's about a little boy. He wanted to go inside here, and then, when the lady sent him out, he started crying--he was lost--somewhere that he didn't know where he was.

James, a five year-old Black boy in a ghetto school told this brief story in response to one of a series of pictures which was shown to him. He is one of many boys who have no difficulty in expressing themselves verbally--in "reading" a picture, telling in their own language what the picture says to them. James brings his own personal experience to his story; he expresses what he sees through the screen of his own feelings. He has language, and so do most of the millions of children who are labeled "disadvantaged".

James was one of 72 kindergarten and first-grade boys from two schools in a Black community who were the subjects in a recent study (Bromwich, 1967). The purpose of this investigation was to discover the relationships between verbal imagination of beginning school children and other attributes, among them, teachers' judgements of children's classroom behavior. Only boys participated, because it is the boy in ghetto schools who tends to have the most difficulty in school-type learning.

The study showed that the boys who were ranked lowest by their teachers in classroom cooperative behavior demonstrated more verbal imagination than those who were ranked highest. The pictures to which the boys responded were selected for ambiguity of content and for affect; they differed greatly from the bland, undramatic "instructional" pictures usually shown in the classroom.

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The study also showed a positive correlation between the imaginative quality of verbal responses to the pictures and the total quantity of verbal production. In other words, the children who ranked low in cooperative behavior responded with greater imagination and also produced a greater quantity of language than those who ranked high.

What is the meaning of some of these findings for the classroom teacher? First of all, there are many highly verbal young children in ghetto schools who bring affect, and therefore potential motivation and involvement, to the school situation. They are ready to bring their own personal meanings to new situations, and even to express those meanings verbally when someone is willing to listen. Unfortunately the study shows that more often than not, the boys with the most verbal and personal spontaneity are also the ones who often are viewed negatively by teachers. Some of my informal observations of these children make the differences between the "good" boys and the "bad" boys even more striking. On the whole, I found the "uncooperative" boys more spontaneous in person-to-person interaction, more curious about their surroundings, freer with their language in informal conversation, and more trusting of me--a stranger--than their "cooperative" peers. As I took each child out of his classroom, I, of course, did not know how the teacher had ranked him on the cooperative behavior continuum. With few exceptions, however (a few boys from middle-class homes who were both highly intelligent and very imaginative), I was able to differentiate between the "uncooperative pupil"--the "bad" boy: the free, easy, inquisitive, highly verbal, and spontaneous child, and the "good" boy: the quiet, passive, sedate child with what-I-have-characterized-as bland affect. Additional data from the children's report cards showed that a larger number of boys with low behavior rankings and high levels of verbal imagination had poor academic marks but received high marks on the report-card

item: meets new situations with confidence, and low marks on the item: respects authority. The reverse was true on the report cards of many children with satisfactory academic makrs, bland affect, and an absence of spontaneity.

It seems that many children come into our schools with a considerable degree of self-confidence, eager to become involved in new ventures, full of language of their own, but who, for a variety of reasons, do not fit into the classroom scheme of the teacher; therefore they must change their ways--which may mean, suppress their spontaneity in personal responsiveness and language, their inquisitiveness about their new environment--and learn the ways of the subdued, bland, conforming, quiet child who will perform tasks in which he finds no relevance to his reservoir of personal (cognitive and affective) experience.

Indeed, there is considerable evidence that we as teachers do not use to their educational advantage children's abilities and inclinations that they bring to school with them. When we ask children to be quiet and sit still, we suppress not only their spontaneity, curiosity, and freedom of movement, but also their self-assurance, dignity, verbal spontaneity, verbal responsiveness, and fluency. Since the language they bring with them is so vital for their continued intellectual as well as psychosocial development, we must find ways of helping them to become invovled totally so that they do not turn off the goings-on in the classroom altogether and become either "impossible, disruptive problem children" or quiet, withdrawn, unresponsive, inactive, and non-learning children.

Before discussing some of the specific ways in which the assets of these children can be utilized and built upon, especially in the language

area, I would like to delve into another aspect of the so-called disadvantaged child's problem in the realm of education.

It has now been established that James and many other children from inner-city and poor rural communities have language. They use it effectively with their peers, and, when called upon, in a one-to-one relationship with an attentive adult. Therefore James's major educational problem is not the absence or even the paucity of language itself, but it may be that the school, the teacher, the curriculum does not provide him with the proper opportunities to use his language for learning and for his intellectual growth. Although the language of many of these children may not be standard English, or as varied in vocabulary as that of their middleclass counterparts, there is evidence of fluency, imagination, and certainly the ability to use language as a tool for communicating with others. The fluency, imagination, and personal quality of this language are attributes that could and should be built upon and used in the classroom to promote the development and learning of each child.

My ideas regarding the language needs of children from poverty areas and how best to meet these needs do not spring from theory alone, but also from several years of first-hand experience with young children in the Kindergarten Enrichment Project of Pacoima. The purpose of this program, supplementary to public school, which I initiated one year before the inception of Head Start, was to enrich the total experience, raise the self-concept, and encourage, enhance, and develop language of children who were identified in the kindergarten as "not with it." The school served the inhabitants of a large federal public housing project, and the enrichment program operated as an adjunct to the school. The teachers were asked to identify children who:

a) did not perform tasks given to them;

b) did not use their teachers as resource persons--e.g. did not ask questions or request help when needed;
c) did not show interest in or attention to stories read or told;
d) seemed to operate on the fringe or outside of the group, and, in the judgement of the teacher, were not fully profiting from their school experience.

Two of the project goals most relevant here were to help each child

1) to build an image of himself as a competent individual, a learner who could use his abilities and his environment profitably for his own growth and learning;
2) to enhance his use of language, especially as a tool for thought.

The latter implies the use of language not only to communicate with others, but to accompany his own actions, experience, feelings--gain gratification from talking about what he sees, hears, feels, and does. Such connection between language and experiencing is an impotant step toward thought which has been called "internalized speech" (Vygotsky, 1962). By using his language to enhance his thinking, the child grows intellectually.

The major point here is that children from the poorest communities have language but are limited in the range of their uses of language because they have lacked models who connect language with action, with experience, with feelings. The relative absence of this role of language, sometimes called the "intrapersonal role of language" (in contrast with "interpersonal language)(Cazden, 1968) may be one of the greatest educational disadvantages that these children have as compared with middle-class children.

Children need to experience diversity in the use of language: they need to hear language used, and use language themselves, for communication with others and as running commentary to what they are experiencing, and finally, they need to use language to extend beyond their immediate experience for planning and organizing activities--including those in dramatic play (Smilansky, 1968).

The great variety of ways in which the articulate middle-class child is exposed to language and its different uses may be an important aspects of the often-referred-to hidden curriculum of the middle-class child. The school's responsibility for the inner-city child may lie in the creation of a multitude of opportunities to experience language in new and different ways--even stories, books, verses, maybe xx unfamiliar language experiences which can enrich the child's life greatly. The child must be exposed to many different ways of experiencing and experimenting with new functions of language. He will find new gratifications through its expanded use.

Luria (1961) has described language as "the essential means whereby the child finds his bearing in the external world." Unfortunately there are many educators and psychologists in the limelight of early childhood "compensatory" education who confuse functional language with correct grammar or speech. Learning to speak in correct standard English sentences has little to do with the diverse uses of language, and even though an increase in vocabulary makes language more useful as a tool, the overemphasis on teaching word labels for objects has little to do with helping children to use language to integrate perceptual data from different sense modalities, to enjoy language in stories and verses, to organize and plan action, and generally as a tool for thought. Therefore, something other than drilling children every day in standard English sentences(Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966) or pouring words into their minds viewed as receptacles, may be more fruitful in helping young children develop intellectually. And in the same vein, when the child enters first grade, or rather today's kindergarten (as the first grade reading program has been lowered into the kindergarten in many districts) the many hours he works on deciphering the written code--recognizing letters and combinations of letters called words,

may not be the most advantageous way to spend the child's hours in school at ages 5 and 6.

What does James's story and all the rest of this have to do with learning in the classroom? James, and many others like him, showed the ability, and, equally important, the motivation to respond verbally to a picture and invest the story with his own life experience and his own background of feelings--he related what he saw in the picture to his own personal life, or vice versa. He gave the picture personal meaning through language. He, however, was one of many who, in the classroom situation, did not perform according to the teacher's expectations. He probably was one of many children who was not in the habit of using language to accompany his actions and experiences--who did not use much language in planning and organizing his play and work although he had the capacity to do so.

And now, to the remedy--what can teachers do (1) to encourage the child to bring his language to the school and to involve himself in the school learning opportunities in a total way? And (2) to help him expand the variety of uses that he can make of language--or, to use Chomsky's terminology: to help him move from language Competence to language Performance?

1. Listen, listen, listen to the child, not only to the words he is saying but to what he is trying to convey. When adults sincerely listen to a child, especially if he comes from a home where he is not used to being listened to, he finds new pleasures in language. Being listened to means that he is important enough to be listened to--what he says is important to someone--therefore he is important to someone--he will upgrade not only himself as a person in his own eyes, also but his verbal utterances; his language all-of-a-sudden has a new importance--among other things, it has become a means toward

greater self-esteem.

2. When expressive language takes on new significance, so will receptive language. When a child has the experience of being listened to, he will be more likely to think that what the other person has to say is also important. Through conversational interaction, he will become a good listener, and will begin to enjoy being read to, being talked to--yes, he might even be willing to listen to directions. It is only when the child truly begins to listen to the adult that the adult can become a useful language model.

3. Because it has been shown that children develop language competency more readily in interaction with adults than with their peers, we need to open up the classroom, train aides and volunteers in listening to children, and in ways of expanding the child's language functions as well as his flow of language; some of these ways consist of asking "why, how, when, where " questions as well as continuing a conversation by introducing new elements which will extend the child's range of thinking (and often his vocabulary) beyond his own statement. Story telling and the reading of books can also be more effective in a one-to-one relationship or in small groups where the child can allow himself to become more fully involved in the story.

4. Children can be good models for each other in the use of language, and the child with a richer repertoire of language and language functions invariably will help the child with a smaller language repertoire, especially if the classroom atmosphere is conducive to children working together. Certainly an "integrated" classroom (not only racially but also socio-economically provides such a ~~situation~~ setting.

5. Help children move from what Kagan has called an "impulsive" cognitive style

to a more "reflective" manner of dealing with learning tasks. Help children to spend time thinking about questions, problems, actions, processes, experiences before responding too quickly, and encourage them to use language as they are thinking.

6. Encourage children to engage in running commentaries about what they are experiencing or doing, and help them eventually to use language beyond describing experiences of the moment, but to organize, plan, think ahead, orient their actions, thoughts toward the next step--the immediate future. Part of the hidden middle-class curriculum is the mother's listening to the child, expanding the child's language, and modeling for the child a kind of language which describes in detail what is going on at the moment as well as projecting actions into the future; e.g.

> O.K. here goes the big chocolate cake into the oven. Oh, will that cake taste good! After I hang up my apron and wash my messy hands, I'll get your brown sweater and my yellow coat, and then, guess what? We shall get into my car and go shopping for dinner. Now, let me see--what shall we eat tonight?

The teacher can converse with the child about what he is doing, and that does not limit her to asking questions:

T. Oh, David, I see you are using the magnet. What is happening? (no response) You are testing to see which things you can pick up with the magnet. Did this pin cling to the magnet?

Ch. Yes.

T. Were you able to pick it up (nods)
What else did you try? (child points to paper clip)
Oh, the paper clip--and....

Ch. I picked it up too.

T. Good for you; did you try to pick up anything else?

Ch. Yes, this here.

T. What is it?

Oh. A cork.

T. And did it cling to the magnet?

Ch. No.

T. Why not?

Ch. It's not metal.

T. You really know, don't you! The magnet did not pick up the cork because the cork is not made of metal. And what does that tell you about magnets?

Ch. It picks up things made of metal.

T. Yes, that's right--magnets pick up only things made of metal.

Even complimenting a child or giving him "social reinforcement" can be done with language building in mind. Instead of saying:

"Tom, you are doing a very fine job! "

the teacher can say something like:

"Tom, you are building such a very strong building. You have a solid base made of the large blocks and you put the smaller blocks on top. That building will certainly hold up!"

This type of response gives the child much more, both affectively and cognitively. Affectively, it says more to him than would a casual comment--it recognizes his specific area of competence, and cognitively, it expresses in language what he has done and done so well.

7. Expose children to real experiences, as well as pictures representing scenes from real life. Pictures cut out from magazines and mounted are often useful. Children will relate themselves to pictures that portray the kind of people he knows in the types of scenes he experiences, rather than representations of neat-looking children, always happy and smiling in front of their neat little white houses with the picket fences and their neatly mowed lawns. Children are interested in adults too, ~~especially as~~ in pictures that do not tell a clear and definite story, but the content of which is ambiguous

enough so that a number of stories, very different from each other, can easily be told about the picture. Encourage each child to tell his own personal story about each picture. This way children learn that there is not only one response, the "correct answer" but that there are many different ways of responding all of which are fun, and are accepted. Children thus learn that there is value in difference.

Pictures and, of course, actual life experiences provide wonderful opportunities to help the child extend his thoughts beyond his original statement. A direct response to what the child is saying shows interest in his story, and also curiosity about how the story develops:

T. Tell me a story about this picture.

Ch. The boy is tired.

T. Why do you think he is tired?

Ch. He had to run so many errands for his mother.

T. What did he have to do for his mother?

Ch. Get some bread at the grocery store.

T. Oh, and what else?

Ch. Take the baby for a walk.

T. Why do you think his mother asked him to do that?

Ch. To get him out from under her feet so she could fix supper.

This and many other possible examples point out the child's competence in language and thought that needs to be exercised--brought to the level of Performance--and there lies a major responsibility of the teacher.

I have attempted to describe some of the ways in which a teacher accepts a child with his language that he brings to school, how she can build upon

the language of that child and help him to extend his use of language for greater personal satisfaction, higher cognitive complexity, and greater freedom and flexibility of thought and action.

> The root of the disadvantage of many people is that they do not feel a need to develop their language, and the reason is that they are unaware of the possibilities of language. They imperfectly appreciate the nature, the uses, and joy of language. They have a jewel which is worth a fortune, which can be worked to a rare edge of precision, which can be cut to a many-faceted beauty; and they are playing marbles with it in the backyard (Wilkinson, 1971--p.139).

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